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ABSTRACT

Changes in pedagogy, technology, and resources have forced tremendous change in library instruction in the United States over the past few years. One educational factor has changed even more than learning theory or the technology we use to apply and explore it, and that factor is the characteristics of our user populations. Increasing diversity in students' age, ethnicity, and academic preparation, added to the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of academic curricula, makes it vital for us to question our assumptions about who and what we are teaching in libraries, and how we are teaching it. The "average"18- year-old college student prepared with basic research skills does not exist now, if indeed that average student ever did. Today's students have a wide spectrum of backgrounds and library experiences, ranging from novice to expert, from first-year to returning adult, from non-native English speaker to under-represented ethnic group. This paper discusses recent statistics, and experiences at Harvard University, Northeastern University, and the University of Washington libraries. (Contains 5 references.) (Author/AEF)

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Teaching Across the Divides in the Library Classroom

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Abstract:

Changes in pedagogy, technology, and resources have forced tremendous change in library instruction in the United States over the past few years. One educational factor has changed even more than learning theory or the technology we use to apply and explore it, and that factor is the characteristics of our user populations. Increasing diversity in students' age, ethnicity, and academic preparation, added to the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of academic curricula, makes it vital for us to question our assumptions about who and what we are teaching in libraries, and how we are teaching it. The "average" 18- year-old college student prepared with basic research skills does not exist now—if indeed that average

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student ever did. Today's students have a wide spectrum of backgrounds and library experiences, ranging from novice to expert, from first-year to returning adult, from non-native English speaker to underrepresented ethnic group.

Facts and Figures

Some recent statistics can help provide definitions of the user population of U.S. libraries in institutions of higher education today. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, about 15.5 million Americans are enrolled in higher education programs—ranging from one-semester classes at community colleges to multi-year graduate programs. These numbers include an increasing number of graduate students, students of color, international students, and student outside the "normal" range of 18-25 years of age.

Between 1980 and 1997, the number of African-American students in United States colleges and universities increased by 25%, the number of Hispanic students more than doubled, Asian-American students nearly tripled, and Native American higher education enrollments increased by 65%. Add to this the recent influx of international students to the United States: in 1999/2000, foreign-student enrollment in the U.S. increased nearly 5% from the previous year, to an all-time high of 514,723. Some perspective on the increase in foreign students can be gained by looking at the markedly higher increases in the U.K. and Australia. Proportionally, Australia is working with three times the number of international students as the U.S., so we are far from alone in addressing increasing numbers of diversified user groups.

Statistics aside, there are other factors contributing to the need for changes in library teaching: advances in technology provide opportunities in education, as does the increasing knowledge about different learning and teaching styles. Obviously, there is no one "one size fits all" approach to teaching so many diverse groups. You may wonder if the need to reach these users really exists. I suspect any of us who have seen students, undergraduate and graduate alike, attempting to carry out their research using only Google can make a solid case for how vital it is for users to know about the larger world of information.

What are the effective methods for teaching library skills and concepts to a truly heterogeneous user population, many of whom have very different preparations and needs from the traditional students with whom we have worked in the past? We'll look at a couple of "cases in point" to see if any patterns emerge.

Library Teaching at Harvard

At Harvard University we work with a diverse group of students from all walks of life who come to us from around the world. This includes international students who have come to Harvard to study, as well as students who are not only pursuing their own studies but acting as teaching fellows in classrooms. Many of them are teaching large groups of undergraduates while having to learn the ropes of the research environment in Harvard libraries at the same time. This can be especially challenging for foreign researchers, since many European libraries have closed stacks, whereas the stacks in most Harvard libraries are open and students page materials themselves.

Librarians have recently become much more actively involved in orienting to the libraries these graduate students who are also teachers. We design programs aimed at reaching international students, especially teaching fellows, knowing that while we reach them, we reach their undergraduate students as well. These programs tend to be quite personalized, emphasizing individual research consultations over classroom presentations, since students' experiences, backgrounds, and needs vary considerably. We have seen a remarkable increase in requests for these individual consultations based on the work we've been doing with these students: the "word of mouth" success quotient in library instruction seems particularly

powerful among graduate and international students – finding a friendly resource in the library (AKA, a librarian) is a secret many students are eager to share with their friends and in their classes.

Another set of non-traditional students at Harvard are those enrolled in the Extension School. The Extension School's programs often serve adult, returning students – many of whom have been out of school for a number of years. These students are not shy about seeking out research help, or making their information needs known in classes. They tend to be highly motivated, goal-oriented, curious students who are like knowledge sponges: they absorb every fact and detail eagerly, creating contexts for the information we provide perhaps more readily even than traditional students since they are usually pursuing highly focused careers. They typically have less time for study, and want to do as much work as they can in as little time as possible. When teaching these groups, we can always get their attention by saying: "Listen to me for 20 minutes and I'll save you hours in your research."

The Northeastern University Experience

In addition to working with undergraduate and graduate students, alumni, faculty, and staff, the Northeastern University Libraries provide library instruction and research support to a diverse group of non-traditional academic library users. They range in age and experience from students in academic enrichment programs in urban middle school and high schools in Boston, to mature, returning students enrolled in the University College (http://www.ace.neu.edu), Northeastern University's continuing education program. These groups have very different instruction needs from traditional full-time students, and we teach to them in a variety of ways.

First, we utilize the classroom environment. We teach these students in the library's hands-on electronic teaching facility with 30 individual student computer workstations and an instructor's station at the front of the classroom. We built visual redundancy into this room: the instructor's workstation control system can send its screen images to all student workstations as well as to a video-data projection system, so students can view the image both at the front of the room and on their desktops. Accommodations for the differently-abled include hand-cranked computer tables to allow wheelchair access to a workstation, infra-red assistive listening devices for the hard of hearing, and voice recognition software to allow navigation of the Web and computing environment for the blind.

The middle and high school students who come to us are excited about coming into a university library: they are almost literally bursting with energy and determined to be "cool." Most of them feel they don't have to ask questions, since they were raised as the digital generation. Their one-hour class session often is their first experience with a large library and with the Library of Congress classification system. Our instructional goals for them are modest: to familiarize them with the academic library and how to navigate the environment. Rather than trying to suppress these students' exuberance, Northeastern librarians use it while giving a brief orientation to the library's research and information gateway (http://www.lib.neu.edu/nulis/) in the classroom. The students are familiar with computers and immediately try to go to games or e-mail, so they are startled when they find their workstations are "controlled" by the instructor. The interesting effect this has, however, is to see their concentration on what is happening (as if by magic) on their screens. During the necessarily brief classroom session, there is just enough time to demonstrate searching of their assigned Web resources, give them a little hands-on time, and encourage them to come back and ask us for help.

The major learning experience takes place, however, when the class is divided into small groups for a library tour. Library service points are highlighted and it is emphasized early and often that they can – and should -- always ask for help. During the tour, librarians walk students through the process of finding a record for a book in the online catalog, reading the record, copying down the location and call number information and going into the stacks to find the book. Many librarians let the group select the topic to

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search, then use a keyword search to move into subject headings and narrow down results. Using this approach, we engage the students in the process of finding out what we have in the stacks on "their" topic.

Sometimes the book we're looking for is shelved in the middle of a long range of shelves. I lead them through the narrow space between the shelves, pick out the book, and we all examine it on the other side! It's an opportunity for the line of students to be among the books and the progression of call numbers as we sidle through the stacks. While this may appear to be a frivolous activity, the interaction and questions: "What is the call number in front of you?" "Is this the book?" and "Are we there yet?" demonstrate the librarian's approachability and willingness to work with them. It also helps the students to become comfortable with an unfamiliar environment, to feel as if this is a place they belong, a place they can navigate. A couple of weeks later, when a student from the tour returns to the library, they feel more as if they know it, and often unhesitatingly approach the reference desk to introduce themselves: "I was on your library tour; we looked for stuff about dating."

The adult and continuing education students with whom we work are at the other end of the energy spectrum and our teaching interactions with them are very different. In addition to their "real-life" experiences, many of them are returning to school after having been away from it, probably holding a full-time job, and so they often attend classes after a full, long day at work. Although they tend to be more low-key than full-time day students, they are not afraid to ask questions and, also unlike many traditional students, readily express their anxiety about using computers or the library for research. The majority of these students prefer to follow the online demonstration on the projector screen, rather than on their own monitors. So with these students it's crucial to give them ample amounts of hands-on time and individual attention during their electronic classroom session. Interestingly, these groups are especially appreciative of printed notes and help guides—they refer to these sources while in class and a number have mentioned it's easy to use (low-tech) later. Other reasons for their preferences may be generational: they associate the library session to the technology-free classroom experience they remember from the last time they were in school. Their behavior also may be physically based—personally, I find it easier to understand what is being said if I can see the speaker's face; also, a projector screen is easier to read than a computer screen when one is wearing bifocals!

In addition to questions about library resources (on-campus and remote), adult learners always ask about opportunities for follow-up research assistance during class. These busy students use phone and e-mail reference service, and contact their librarian instructor for e-mail, phone and in-person research consultations.

The UW Experience

The University of Washington Libraries have addressed the diverse needs of learners through established instruction programs and through collaborations with academic programs throughout the campus. The ongoing course-related instruction programs serve many academic programs, including:

- College preparation courses offered by UW Educational Outreach for international students not yet enrolled at an American university and preparing for the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam;
- Instruction and orientation to libraries for the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship recipients, who are mid-career professionals from designated countries of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East and Eurasia who come to the United States for one year of non-degree graduate study and practical, work-related experience;
- Development of web-based instructional tutorials structured around the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education that incorporate a variety of pedagogical strategies to

address both diverse learning styles and the need for self-paced learning anytime and anywhere. UWill – University of Washington Information Literacy Learning – is funded through the University Initiative Fund and to date has developed a general-education level component, Research 101, and several course-specific tutorials. Future development will be in the areas of discipline-specific content and technological development in order to allow selection and customization of educational content.

Through its involvement with UWired, and its emphasis upon bringing information technologies into the practice of teaching and learning, the University of Washington Libraries has worked with a number of campus initiatives that have addressed the needs of students who may match the traditional profile of a college student. In the inaugural years of the UWired initiative, efforts included both classroom and on-the-road instructional support to student-athletes. Student-athletes have demanding practice and game schedules that often take them out of town during the academic term. Information technology instruction and technical support allowed these athletes to remain in contact with instructors and classmates, to continue working on academic projects, and even to turn in assignments while on the road. The Bridge Program, conducted during the month prior to the start of classes, was established for entering new student-athletes to get a jump-start on academic and technological skills they would continue to pursue during the academic year.

A significant issue in the state of Washington is the small proportion of high school graduates from under-represented groups who go on to pursue higher education. The University of Washington is partnering with several regional groups that include community organizations and school districts and the Governor's Office on a federally funded initiative, GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs; http://gearup.washington.edu).

UW Libraries have been active participants in the GEAR UP Summer Institutes. These bring 800-1000 middle school age students to the Seattle campus for a week-long event providing academic experiences and career guidance to make the option of going to college or university a reality for students. They encourage academic achievement in middle- and high-school. The Libraries provide a booth at information fairs that distributes informational brochures and bookmarks from the ALA graphics catalog. Librarians at this booth also played, "Do You Dare Challenge the Master of the Internet?" in which they took questions on any topic from visitors to the booth and posted the answers using a variety of resources, print and electronic.

This activity draws upon the well-established Question Board (http://www.lib.washington.edu/Ougl/fun/qboard/), posted in both analog and digital format in the Odegaard Undergraduate Library (and also at other institutions). The Question Board provides an informal avenue of communication between students and Library staff. The Libraries actively solicited faculty teaching the one-week courses offered during the GEAR UP summer institutes and provided instructional sessions where appropriate, frequently in computer-equipped classrooms using participatory, active learning methods. In addition, the Libraries also provided an "anti-tour." Rather than giving a physical tour of the twenty-one library locations, the anti-tour focused on the role and history of libraries and what libraries and librarians do to support academic success.

Since participants in GEAR UP visit our campus for one week and live in communities where they do not have direct access to the UW Libraries, this approach was adopted to avoid provoking the well documented phenomenon of "library anxiety." The size and scale of the Libraries can be overwhelming to first time users, and this approach also promoted students' ongoing use of local library resources.

As the preceding cases show, it's evident that a variety of teaching styles need to be employed to reach varied groups of library researchers. We've seen some patterns emerge from our different experiences, but since our purpose is to maximize library learning for all the students with whom we work, we need to

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determine which are the most effective teaching strategies we can use for various user populations.

Learning Assessment

Learning assessment can prove to be a powerful tool in finding the most effective teaching methods. Assessment focused upon student learning is gaining increased attention among higher education faculty and administrators as a means of gathering evidence for improvements. James Anderson, Vice Provost at North Carolina State University, has given extensive consideration to issues of learning styles and achievement of students, and students from under-represented groups in particular. While there is research linking cultural heritage with particular learning style preferences, Anderson also points out that there may be a mismatch between these cultural preferences and the preferences that are successful in higher education learning environments.

Acknowledging, Understanding, and Responding

This research, united with our own experiences, leads us to believe our best course as library teachers is to use a combination of methods in reaching our diverse user populations. Flexibility, adaptability, and creativity are some of the most valuable characteristics we can embody in our library teaching. Being attuned to students' educational, cultural, and social diversities can enable us to respond to their information needs in a more effective way, and improve our teaching across the divides in today's library classroom.

Notes

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